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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: July 1, 2002

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State of Washington is Model for National Welfare-to-Work Bill

OLYMPIA, WA – Congress is considering new legislation that would allow states to develop welfare-to-work programs similar to the State of Washington's Community Jobs program.

Community Jobs is the first and largest program in the country to provide the hardest-to-employ welfare recipients with paid work and training that prepare them for permanent, unsubsidized employment.

Senate Bill 2631 recently introduced by U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and co-sponsored by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., would allow states to implement similar transitional jobs programs. Known as the Support, Training, Employment Programs (STEP) Act, it would provide states more than \$2.3 billion over five years beginning in fiscal year 2003.

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"The real measure of success of welfare reform is when a person has the opportunity to overcome barriers to self-sufficiency and can find and keep a good job," said Sen. Murray. "Washington's Community Jobs program is helping people get the education, training and support they need to lift themselves out of poverty, and is a model for the rest of the nation. I want to help build on that success."

Community Jobs is a part of WorkFirst, Washington's welfare-to-work program that helps families become self-sufficient by providing training and support services necessary for parents to get a job, keep a job and move up a career ladder.

Washington developed Community Jobs to serve the hardest-to-employ welfare recipients – those with limited education, poor work history and difficult family situations. More than 7,500 parents have enrolled since 1998. They build job skills and improve their communities by working at least 20 hours per week for up to nine months at government agencies, schools, local businesses and nonprofit organizations. Seventeen community-based organizations and four tribes administer Community Jobs throughout the state. Participants earn minimum wage while receiving mentoring from employees at a wide range of work sites.

"Community Jobs is a way to bring new hope and opportunity to financially struggling families. Seventy-two percent of participants have successfully obtained unsubsidized jobs. This is an incredible achievement for thousands of families and benefits hundreds of employers," said Martha Choe, director of Washington's Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development.

Community Jobs was one of only eight programs in the country chosen to receive a 2001 Innovations Award from the Council of State Governments. Gov. Locke accepted the award during a ceremony in April.

Research supports transitional jobs programs as a way to help low-income families make the transition from welfare to work. A recent study by Mathematica Policy Research, a privately owned national research firm, found most of those who completed transitional jobs programs found unsubsidized, full-time employment. Another study by

the University of Washington and Washington state found that Community Jobs raised participants' likelihood of employment by 33 percent.

Also, research from the Economic Opportunity Institute in Seattle shows that participants took home \$16,220 annually through wages and tax credits just two years after leaving Community Jobs. Welfare recipients who didn't work took home just \$6,552.

Funding for transitional jobs is also part of the welfare reauthorization bill just passed out of the Senate Finance Committee. The federal law funding WorkFirst and other state welfare reform programs ends on Sept. 30, 2002, unless Congress renews it in some form.

Washington state's Office of Trade and Economic Development, Employment Security Department, the Department of Social and Health Services, and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges administer WorkFirst services.

For additional information about WorkFirst, see www.wa.gov/workfirst.

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OTED Publication Number: WorkFirst 01-001 (Bill)